

**The Guide to Becoming a Champion Tennis Parent**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

**Kimberly J. Wyse**

**Thesis Advisor:  
Kathy Bull**

-----*Kathy A. Bull*-----

**Ball State University**

**Muncie, Indiana**

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## **Purpose of Thesis**

This manual provides recommendations for tennis parents who want to become champions at their great responsibility of guiding their children to success. In this manual, the three problem areas of junior tennis are addressed. To solve these current problems of pushy parents, hot tempers, and tennis burnout, suggestions are made which result in the utilization of effective communication. Along with the discussion on the problems and solutions of junior tennis competition, a detailed analysis explains the characteristics of both good and bad tennis parents. In this analysis, guidelines are suggested for tennis parents to enable them to become the champion parents which they desire to be. Lastly, this manual should be used by tennis parents to nurture their children's interest in tennis enabling them to enjoy the sport for the rest of their lives.

The sweet sounds of shuffling feet, bouncing balls, and pinging rackets have become familiar to today's tennis courts. Not only is tennis becoming an ever popular sport for adults, but children are also catching the enjoyable craze. With the growing number of children getting involved playing tennis competitively, it is necessary to address the tennis parent/child relationship which develops. Parental influence over a child or junior tennis player is the major detrimental force to a youth enjoying and succeeding at the game. All too often parents fail to take successful steps for supporting their children. Parents are responsible for a sizable portion of the fault associated with today's problems in junior tennis. With positive parental influence, the junior tennis problems, such as pushy and forceful parents, hot tempers, and tennis burnout, can be alleviated. This manual will describe, examine, and make positive suggestions to how parents influence their children's tennis careers. Hopefully, this guide will offer tennis parents valuable information and knowledge which will enable them to become championship parents.

Associated with the increasing popularity of tennis are the advantages the game offers the youthful player. According to Billy Jean King, "There are few sports more ideally suited to children than good ol' tennis" (King and Hoffman, 1978, p. 19). The sport of tennis is an especially great activity for children due to several reasons. Taken at the recreational level, tennis is neither excessively time-consuming nor prohibitively expensive. Even though tennis is not a completely risk-free activity, it is considered a non-violent, non-contact sport. This is an important consideration for parents who are rightfully concerned about the physical well-being of their young athletes. The technical sport of tennis offers the child not blessed with an overabundance of natural athletic ability, the opportunity to excel with hard work and dedication. Tennis does not discriminate against different physical sizes or gender.

Therefore, tennis can be just as an enjoyable and rewarding sport for a young man of small stature as it is for a strong, lean woman. The fundamentals of tennis are identical for boys and girls. Finally, tennis offers the child the opportunity to play a lifetime sport both at the individual and team level (King and Hoffman). Unfortunately, as the popularity and attractive advantages increase so do the directly related problems of childhood tennis.

After a child decides to pursue the sport of tennis, decisions for mapping out a strategy of a child's tennis development should be considered. The primary emphasis by parents should be on how to assist their child rather than on how to teach her/him. A successful tennis strategy for children should consider the following helpful steps: "1) how to help them obtain proper instruction in the fundamentals, 2) how to help them deal with competition, and 3) how to help them get the most out of their involvement with tennis" (King and Hoffman, p. 7). To better enhance the child's enjoyment of the game, the developmental strategy should be considered and agreed upon by both the parents and child. Above all else, this mapping strategy should teach a young tennis player how to have fun with the sport, because that is what life is all about.

Parental influence and involvement can be detrimental to both success and failure in a child's tennis career. Parents need to display an interest in their child's development and nurture her/his interest of the tennis game. The channels of communication between parents and children should be left open at all times. Too often parents do not truly know their child's desires and goals; therefore, parents are responsible for a sizable portion of today's problems in junior tennis. Parents should display concern about their child's activities by asking questions, listening to what she/he has to say, and taking notes. In Tennis for Your Child, Andy Anderson (1987)

suggests utilizing the board-meeting concept to share ideas and to find the best ways to deal with problems of budgets and schedules. These board meetings should involve talking back and forth, sharing opinions, getting ideas, and making decisions. During these meetings, parents often make the frequent mistake of referring to the money spent on developing their children's tennis abilities as a great "investment." Unfortunately, this investment terminology places tremendous burdens and pressures on the child; especially in the beginning when the focus should be on enjoyment and learning (Anderson). During parent/child board meetings, the parents should display concern and support while realizing only few children ever become great tennis players. Children should set goals relating to attitude, stroke consistency, practicing, enjoying the game, respect for opponent, self-discipline, conditioning, and concentration. Along with changing goals for different developmental stages, parents should make it clear to their children that there are going to be set backs, peaks, and valleys during their tennis journey, but that they will always be with them (Anderson). From the increased junior participation in tennis arises the three problem areas of pushing tennis on the child, hot tempers, and tennis burnout. As more children increase their involvement in tennis, these problems become bigger. Tennis parents need to address these three areas to better support the success of their children's young tennis careers. Even if early detection of these problems is not recognized, parents can still use corrective means to bring enjoyment and success back into their child's career.

The first area of concern deals with parents pushing tennis on their children. The question which comes to mind is this: "How early should children begin to play tennis?" There is no magical or right age for children to begin learning and participating in tennis. Each child is a different individual with various developmental

skills. Jimmy Connors and Tracy Austin hit the court when they were the mere age of three. On the other hand, Billie Jean King and Stan Smith did not pick the sport up until the respective ages of eleven and fourteen (Anderson). Despite their various entry levels, these four tennis players became all-time greats of the sport. Most experts agree that the best age to begin teaching children to play tennis is when they possess the physical strength to handle the racket correctly and, most importantly, when they show a strong interest to learn the sport. For most children this physical strength and interest comes between the ages of six and eight (Kelly, 1991). The young child should have fun learning the basic skills and developing hand-eye coordination. Parents do not harm their child by beginning she/he playing young, but great harm is done when they push their child into competition too early. Parents must remember that it takes an average of eighteen to twenty years to train and develop an accomplished tennis player. As young children learn the game of tennis, it often takes them two years just to develop the skills to keep the ball in play (Anderson). Parents should avoid being impatient and pushing the game of tennis on young children. The concept that drills and skills come first and playing the game is secondary should be of prime importance.

The second problem area involves the hot temper of today's tennis youths. Many young players do not realize that their success is controlled by their personality and temperament. Unfortunately, some junior players react to stress with an energized temper. This energized temper is characterized by nervousness, fear, anxiety, frustration, and a desire for vengeance. None of these emotions allow for concentration and relaxation needed to succeed in a tennis match (Loehr and Kahn, 1987). Common reasons for tennis temper tantrums in children include the following: 1) the need for attention, 2) the misconception that the display of temper will enable

them to get their own way, 3) frustration as a result of setting unrealistic goals, and 4) parent's belief that temper is part of the game and growing up (Anderson).

To become successful, tennis players must control their emotions and concentrate on the game itself. Parents should realize that hot court tempers have led to the increased number of spoiled brats on the tennis courts of the United States. These spoiled tennis brats lack responsibility, discipline, and respect for authority while using foul language and crude gestures frequently (Anderson). The only way there will be a decline in the number of tennis brats is if parents begin to play the larger role and accept responsibility for their child's actions. Parents need to exercise authority and allow no excuses for bad tempers.

The third problem area addresses the issue of tennis burnout. Even as parents and coaches fear the forces of burnout, it still happens all too frequently for children between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. Burnout surfaces during this age group as tournaments begin to play a big part in a youngster's tennis development. When children are unable to deal with the pressures and stresses of competition, they become disillusioned and burnt out with the game. Tennis burnout seems to develop from a lack of enthusiasm rather than a lack of ability. According to Anderson (pp. 43-44), common causes of burnout among youngsters and teenagers include: "1) trying too hard to please parents, 2) pressure from setting unrealistic goals, 3) worrying about what others will say when they are not playing up to expectations, 4) feeling they have let their coach and parents down if they lose, 5) being unorganized, and 6) frustration." Much of the stress put on junior tennis players originates in the home environment. To reduce such stress, parents should encourage a positive home atmosphere where they keep in touch with their children, encourage positive thoughts and actions, and minimize negative feelings.



Fortunately, the above mentioned problem areas can be solved with positive parental influence. Positive parental influence will recognize the symptoms of these junior tennis problems and bring enjoyment back in the game for their child. The most difficult part of utilizing positive parental influence happens when the parents must analyze their shortcomings. It is very difficult for parents to realize when and how they are restricting their child's enjoyment of tennis. Parents must be honest with themselves if they want to honestly be a positive influence on their child's tennis career.

To determine if parents are detrimental to their children's tennis careers, several issues need to be analyzed. According to Net Results: Training the Tennis Parent for Competition by Loehr and Kahn, there are ten characteristics of a parent who is hurting rather than helping her/his child athlete. To begin with, problem parents create additional pressures outside that of tennis itself. These additional pressures are built-up when parents place undue emphasis on winning. Secondly, problem parents resort to the use of fear to push their children to perform better. These parents will utilize the cold shoulder effect by inflicting punishment and withdrawal of love. These actions are very emotionally risky, because over time the parents could seriously harm their child's health and well-being. Along with inflicting fear, problem parents often criticize their children's performances and decisions. When parents become chronic criticizers, they lose their objectivity and become obsessed with winning and losing. They lose their distance and perspective on their children's experiences. As a result, these parents are unable to effectively deal with the emotions and turmoils a junior player experiences. In addition to criticism, problem parents rarely understand expressions of insecurity. These parents do not express to their children that it is normal and fine for them to be under pressure and to be nervous. The fifth group of

problem parents openly display negative emotions for their children tennis players to see. These parents are the ones pacing the sidelines and agonizing over close calls. Unfortunately, these parents do not realize that their display of negative emotions only puts more pressure on their child. In addition to showing negative emotions, many problem parents also think negatively. Negative thinking parents definitely hinder their children from being positive thinkers. The nagging parents increase the pressures of success placed on young players. Nagging parents usually emphasize the “investment” they have put into their child’s tennis career. In addition to nagging parents come the problem parents who foster guilt. Many times junior tennis players feel guilt about all the opportunities their parents have provided for them. Problem parents make tennis seem bigger than life by blowing competition out of proportion. They overemphasize winning or losing while all other considerations take a back seat. The last group of problem parents overlook critical areas of development. These parents will allow their children tennis stars to get away with murder in other areas of their lives. As long as their children continue to excel at tennis, these young tennis stars are allowed to throw fits and treat people badly (Loehr and Kahn). Many times tennis parents possess several of these problem characteristics. Not all tennis parents fit the overbearing stereotype, but unfortunately they still do not promote the standards of acceptable and beneficial parental influence (Trabert, 1988). With honest self-analysis, parents can determine if they are harming their children’s tennis enjoyment and take corrective steps to improve their support.

It is important for parents to utilize encouragement, which in turn enables their children to take an interest in the rewarding game of tennis. Once again, the board meeting concept should be utilized to gain open communication between parents and child. These family board meetings should be scheduled for a specific time and

should be run around a set agenda. By having organized meetings, the parents and children will gain more advantageous information from each other. During these meetings, time should be reserved for children to express themselves. In a comfortable environment, the young tennis player should be able to voice her/his concerns, expectations, goals, and disappointments. Parents should avoid using overbearing control during the meetings and should make sure the children have the opportunity to speak openly. The board meeting concept is successful only when effective communication is shared between the parent and child.

All too often young tennis players are forced into competitive situations before they are ready to deal with the associated stresses. One reason why parents push competitive tennis on their child is because it serves as an effective method to measure progress. There are other effective ways to measure progress besides forcibly pushing them onto the tennis courts (Anderson). Many times pushy parents cause resentment and burnout in their child. Instead, with positive reinforcement parents should introduce and promote the game of tennis into the child's life. With effective communication, parents should ask their child when he/she wants to start playing. Then throughout their tennis careers, children should be asked if they want to continue to competitively play tennis. This allows junior players to feel like they are in control of the direction their careers take. Parents can learn how to be supportive rather than pushy. Junior players who are able to make important decisions about their tennis careers receive the true enjoyment the game has to offer them.

The second area parents need to focus their attention on is their child's temperament. Individual success in junior tennis is directly linked to the player's personality and temperament. The hot tempers displayed on the tennis courts by today's youth is what sometimes gives tennis a negative image. The key to solving

this problem involves parents detecting their children's temperament problems early on in their careers. According to Anderson, "early detection of temper is the single most effective weapon against it" (pp. 35-36). Often tempers rage on the tennis court when the player believes that everyone involved in the match including their opponent, the umpire, and even the tournament officials, is against him/her. Players may also use temper as a mechanism for creating inner energy, but unfortunately this firing up feeling only lasts for a short time and eventually leads to choking and tentative play. Once parents honestly recognize their children have temper problems, they must work together toward a common goal. This common goal should include measuring a match's success in terms of the length of time the player retains control and plays her/his best and not in terms of winning and losing. A temper problem will not disappear by ignoring it or thinking the child will grow out of it as time passes, but instead the temper problem will continue to escalate as the child grows older. Therefore, parents need to exercise strict authority over displays of temper. Many professional players, such as Ivan Lendl and Bjorn Borg, have been kicked off the court and stripped of their tennis rackets by their parents and coaches. In order to be a successful player, a child must be able to control her/his temper(Loehr and Kahn).

After parents detect their child's temperament problem, they must take corrective steps to avoid and alleviate further temper outbreaks. If their children are in the middle of a temper tantrum, parents should not be afraid to take them off the court. By showing their children that a hot temper will not be tolerated, parents are teaching them a valuable lesson that will hopefully stay with them for their entire lives. Parents should utilize effective communication to help their children understand how tempers harm their performances and careers. Young players must understand that they are on the tennis court to play their match, and they are not able to be in command of

everything (Anderson). Powerful negative emotions lead to a loss of control rather than a gain of command (Groppel, Loehr, Melville, and Quinn, 1989). By parents playing a bigger role and accepting more responsibility for their children's actions, tennis brats can be a wave of the past.

As the pressures of tennis take their toll on young players, the effects of burnout escalate. Burnout usually results from the lack of enthusiasm, not loss of ability. Avoiding or overcoming tennis burnout is the stepping stone for a player to successfully enjoying the game. In Tennis for Your Child, Anderson offers several ways to prevent or overcome tennis burnout. These preventative steps include the following: 1) from time to time, parents must remember to ask their children these simple, rarely asked questions of "Are you still having fun?" and "Do you still like the game enough to continue?" 2) a change of scenery may work wonders; for instance, participating in an enjoyable family activity such as a mini-vacation or movie, 3) a six to eight month layoff may be necessary if a short-term change of scenery is not successful, 4) organization of time is especially important, and finally 5) set realistic goals and do not expect overnight success. These suggestions are helpful in reducing the stress a junior player experiences.

Unfortunately, there exists no educational course to help parents deal with the enormous financial and emotional nurturing they must offer their children. Although there is no one true answer to commonly asked questions, there are some guidelines that may help parents when dealing with the three major problem areas. Before parents consult guidelines, it is important for them to rate themselves as a tennis parent. Stan Smith (1990) suggests the following quiz based on Dr. Jim Loehr's book, The Parent-Player Tennis Training Program. By completing this quiz, tennis parents will be provided guidance on what areas of their performance needs the most

improvement. Parents should use the scale below to answer.

- 5 --- Always
- 4 --- Almost always
- 3 --- Sometimes
- 2 --- Almost never
- 1 --- Never

Question 1: Coach your child?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: Watch all your child's matches?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 3: Look nervous on the sideline?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 4: Treat your child differently when he/she wins?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 5: Ignore your child's cheating, racquet-throwing, or abusive language?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 6: Tell your child he/she's being unrealistic when he/she talks of someday becoming a pro?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 7: Believe your family's standard of living has suffered because of the expense of your child's tennis?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 8: Think your child should give up other sports so he/she can concentrate on tennis?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

To find your score, add your answers and write total here: \_\_\_\_\_

If your score was between:

8-16 --- Good job. As a tennis parent, you are a pro.

17-32 --- Slight problem. Work on your strategy and consistency.

33-40 --- Problem parent. Relearn the basics - fast.

Parents should look to the different areas for guidance on improving their performance in each situation (Smith).

Stan Smith provides the following guidelines based on the research of sport psychologists, United States Tennis Association (USTA) studies, and his own personal experience. The first recommended guideline is to be a parent and not a coach. During the beginning, it is great for a parent to introduce tennis to a child. This parent introduction adds spark to the interest of the game. If the child decides to pursue the game, the parent should hand the coaching over to someone else. Very few parents have the technical training to instruct their children, but more importantly, since the roles of coach and parent are so different it is nearly impossible for a person to positively play both roles. While a coach builds a strong tennis player, he/she must criticize and compliment the young player. On the other hand, parents should accept the responsibility of building a strong person. In this parent/child relationship, parents should provide unconditional love that instills self-esteem. For one person to perform both the technical and emotional duties is difficult and often disastrous (Smith).

The second guideline suggested by Stan Smith is that parents should watch no more than 75 percent of their child's matches. By not being present at absolutely all their matches, children will learn that they are the only persons who can control the events of the match. This should help children gain confidence to know that they can compete successfully without their parents watching. Along these same guidelines, parents should watch only between 25 to 50 percent of their child's practices. Parent's

absence at practices promotes their child's on-court independence and a positive coach/student relationship (Smith).

The third guideline states that parents should always look positive during a match. Young players will inevitably look over to their parents and read their body language. Any nervousness the parents display may intensify pressure on young players. Even though it may be difficult during an intense match, parents should try to maintain a calm, confident composure. One way to hide nervousness is by charting the child's match. The use of paper and pencil will give a parents' hands something to do while objectively taking their mind off the on-court drama (Smith).

The fourth guideline involves parental emotional control. Parents should try to maintain an even disposition so as not to portray winning as everything. It is easy for parents to say something positive after a win, but the problem comes when the youngster player fails to defeat an opponent. A good coach will take care of the necessary instruction or criticism for the child, but parents should say something like, "Bad luck, but you competed well," or, "You can get 'em next time." Even though these comments may sound crazy at first, they make a big difference to young players realizing that they are loved and accepted regardless of whether they win (Smith).

The next suggestion deals with parents dealing with ethical and temper problems. The fifth guideline states that parents should reprimand their child for on-court misbehavior. Parents should not accept children cheating, racquet-throwing, or shouting abusive language. Instead, they should pull their child off the court and reprimand her/him. Parents should make it clear to their child that any on-court misbehavior is unexcusable under any circumstances. If parents ignore misbehavior, they are failing their responsibility as a parent (Smith).

The sixth guideline is realizing that a child tennis player should be allowed to



dream. Since dreams are the fuel that keep young people striving, learning, and exploring, parents should never take away their child's dreams even if they are unrealistic. As children develop, they will realize that their goals may be set too high. Parents should help set up the success steps that children must achieve to eventually reach their goals. Throughout their careers, they will revise their dreams to become more fulfilling and realistic. Parents should allow their children the opportunity to dare to dream (Smith).

The seventh guideline deals with the financing of tennis careers. If families have to sacrifice economically for young tennis players, the child may start to experience feelings of guilt associated with the opportunities she/he has been offered. Families do not necessarily have to take out a second mortgage on the house to finance a child's tennis career. Instead, they could utilize support offered by businesses, communities, and the USTA. The USTA may provide some financial and coaching assistance to promising junior players (Smith).

The last guideline offered by Stan Smith states that child tennis players should be encouraged to play other sports. As junior players reach the age of fourteen, they usually have to give up all other sports if they want to reach their full potential in tennis. But up until this age, youngsters should be encouraged to participate in all sports that they enjoy. Children can develop only 50 to 75 percent of their athletic potential by playing tennis. Other sports such as basketball, baseball, soccer, and table tennis will help them develop basic coordination skills and prevent the ever dreaded tennis burnout (Smith).

The USTA now realizes the importance of parental influence on a child's tennis development. In the past, little time and money have been spent on educating tennis parents about positive and negative actions they inflict on their children. But recently,

the USTA has begun to give suggestions to parents on how to become champions at building a strong and loved young player. In a recent USTA publication, Pancho Segura (1992), a famous player and coach, offers the following **DO's** and **DON'TS** for parents. The USTA recommends that parents follow them to become a champion tennis parent.

- 1) If you play well, **DO** make yourself available to play with your child.
- 2) If your child has a tennis pro, **DON'T** you try to coach too.
- 3) **DON'T** give pointers on strategy unless your child literally begs for it -- then keep your comments brief.
- 4) When you watch your child's matches, whether in practice or in a tournament, **DON'T** call lines, applaud, berate the opponent, discuss the match with the umpire, or expound on the match with fellow spectators. **DO** be the epitome of the Silent Observer.
- 5) When your child enters a tournament he/she is on his/her own, **DON'T** go up to the tournament desk -- unless your child wishes to introduce you to the tournament committee. **DON'T** comment on the seedings, the draw, the scheduling, or the court assignments.
- 6) When people tell you how well your child is playing, **DO** say "thank you" - and leave it at that!
- 7) When your child has lost, **DON'T** ask him/her "what happened" or "what went wrong?" Your child will tell you when he/she is ready and then **DO** commiserate together.
- 8) If your child wants to play a tournament, **DO** give him/her help in getting there, **DO** let him/her fill out his/her own entry blank, and **DO** provide the fee for him/her. **DON'T** tell him/her which tournaments to play.
- 9) **DON'T** arrange practice matches for your child, but **DO** help him/her to get to the courts if necessary.
- 10) **DO** display your child's trophies because you're proud of his/her achievements.
- 11) **DON'T** force your child to play or train -- it will never make him/her a champion.

- 12) If your child has a "Bad Year," **DO** encourage him/her and explain (once) that every great player has had a bad loss, a bad season, or a bad year. The defeats are what make a champion.
- 13) **DO** interfere when your child has thrown his/her racket, screamed, yelled, or otherwise behaved in an unsportsmanlike manner on the court.
- 14) **DO** learn and follow the tennis rules and the Code of Ethics, and encourage your child to do likewise.

Mastery of these steps will guarantee parental influence of a champion tennis parent. With positive parental influence, junior tennis players are better able to succeed at truly enjoying the winning side of tennis (Segura).

Hopefully, this manual has been advantageous to the reader. The problem areas of pushy parents, hot player tempers, and tennis burnout have all been addressed. In addition to these problems, suggestions have been made regarding the alleviation of today's junior tennis problems. Parents need to accept the majority of the responsibility for creating a healthy environment where their child can strive toward her/his tennis goals. Effective communication seems to be the key ingredient in this parent/child relationship. In order to follow the positive suggestions made, tennis parents must first evaluate themselves. Parents need to honestly ask themselves if they are a positive influence on their children. If parents analyze their shortcomings, they can take steps toward becoming champion tennis parents. It is definitely a big responsibility to be a tennis parent. Parents do not want to do too little, nor do they want to do too much, when promoting their child's tennis career. Parents need to do the background work with their children to enable them to stand tall and fight hard on the court all alone. Tennis parents should always be open to change in order to improve their child's overall enjoyment of the great game of tennis.

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